Then I'll Come Back to You

By LARRY EVANS

Author of "Once to Every Man"

CHAPTER VI.

My Man O'Mara.

FOR a week and more Caleb Hunter scoured the surrounding country. He whipped over the hills in every direction, half hopeful that he might overtake the boy who had gone in the night. But none of the farmers on the outlying roads had seen pass their way a little foot traveler such as he described, and after a time even that small hope died.

When Dexter Allison came over the next day, his face far more perturbed than Caleb had ever before seen it by the news which Barbara in tears had carried to him, together the two men searched for Steve, driving in silence through the country until they both realized that the search was useless. And at last, one day in early fall, Caleb started alone upon his errand into that stretch of timber to the north which the boy himself had vaguely designated as "up river."

He spent a week in the saddle before he located the cabin of the Jenkinses in an isolated clearing upon the main branch of the river. And even then, when he did locate the Jenkinses, it took hours of quiet argument before Caleb could convince those shy and suspicious people that his errand was an honest one. Eventually they did come to believe him. They led him afoot another half mile up the timber fringed stream to a log cabin set back in the balsams upon a needle carpeted knoll. And they stood and stared in stolid wonder at this portly man in riding breeches and leather puttees when he finally emerged from that small shack. Old Tom's tin box under his arm, and with lips working strangely pinned the door shut behind him.

Caleb left in the limp fingers of the head of the Jenkins' household a yellow tinted note of a denomination which they had not even known existed. He left them half doubting its genuineness until later when there came an opportunity to spend it. And Sarah was waiting at the door of the white place on the hill when Caleb wheeled into the yard at dusk two days later.

"You've found him!" she exclaimed as she glimpsed his face when he entered the hall.

Caleb shook his head, his heart aching at the hunger in her question.

"No, I haven't found him, Sarah," he said gently enough. "But I—I've found out who he is."

They forgot their supper that night. With heads close together they hung for hours over the ink smeared sheaf of papers which the tin box yielded up. Most of them were covered with a cramped and misspelled handwriting which they knew must be that of the one whom Steve had called "Old Tom." Some of them were hard to decipher, but their import was very, very clear.

There was one picture, a miniature of a girl, eager of face and wavy of hair. Her relationship to the boy was unmistakable. Sarah found that and wept over it silently, and while she wept Caleb sifted out the remaining loose sheets.

"It's not hard to understand now, is it?" he said. "It's pretty plain now why he had to go. And we, Sarah—we who were going to 'make something of him'—why, we should have known absolutely without this evidence. They laughed at him, they made fun of him, and there isn't any better blood than flows in that boy's veins! He was Stephen O'Mara's son, and no more brilliant barrister than O'Mara ever addressed a jury of a prisoner's peers and—and broke their very hearts with the simplicity of his pleading."

Sarah folded her thin hands over the woman's picture.

"I like his mother's face," she murmured faintly. "And I'm jealous of her, Cal! You don't have to remind me of the rest of it, either, for I recall it all. She died and he—he went all to pieces. They said at his death that he was destitute. And when he did follow her—across—they hunted everywhere, didn't they, and never found the boy? Didn't some of the newspapers argue that a servant—a gardener—had stolen him?"

Caleb nodded his head.

"Most of them ridiculed the suggestion, but it was true, just the same. That servant was Old Tom. And the only defense he makes is just one line or so in—in this." Caleb dropped a hand upon the half legible pages. "He says that he wasn't going to let civilization make of the boy's life the wreck which he, poor, queer, honest soul, thought it had made of his father's. And do you know, Sarah, do you know, I can't help but believe that this overzealous thing which the law would have prosecuted was the best thing he could have done? I'll take these things now and lock them in the safe for the boy until he comes back home!"

But Sarah Hunter kept the picture of Stephen O'Mara's mother separate from the rest; she took it upstairs with her when she went, white and tired faced, to bed. And it was Sarah's faith which outlasted the years which followed. She never weakened in her belief that some day the boy would come back—she and one other whose faith in his last boyish promise, phrased in bitterness, also endured. For during the next five years there was not a summer which brought Allison into the hills but what the first question of his daughter Barbara, motherless now herself, was of Steve.

"Has—has Stephen come back?" she asked invariably.

At first the query was marked by nothing more than a child's naive eagerness, and later, when it was brought up in a casual, by the way fashion, it was, nevertheless, tinged with hope. Five years lengthened into ten, and still Steve did not come. But whenever Barbara asked that question Caleb remembered, as though it had happened only yesterday, that morning when she first appeared to the boy.

Then came a morning when Stephen O'Mara did return. All winter and throughout the summer, too, the Hunter place had been closed until that day in late October. It had been a warm week—a week of such unseasonable humidity for the hills that Caleb, rising somewhat before his usual hour, had blamed his sleeplessness, as usual, upon the weather. He was glad to be home again that morning. Caleb was wondering if Barbara would be with her father on this trip. Barbara had, he knew, been two years on the continent, "finishing." Allison called it, always with a wry face and a gesture toward his wallet pocket. He was wondering as he came down the stairs if she would ask him again if—if—and then at the sight of a seated figure outside on the top step of the veranda he pulled up sharp in the doorway.

Caleb didn't have to wonder any longer.

The attitude of that figure before him was so like the picture which time had been unable to erase, so absolutely identical in everything save garb and size alone, that the man, recalling a little, dragged one hand across his forehead as though he doubted his own eyes. But when he looked again it was still there, sitting chin in palm, small head under a rather weather beaten felt hat thrust slightly forward, gazing fixedly toward the stucco house beyond the shrubbery. And before Caleb could move, before he was more than half aware of the painful pulse in his throat, it all happened again just as it had happened years and years before.

Caleb heard voices in the adjoining grounds, and as he half turned in that direction Allison's bulky form, vivid in a far more vivid plaid, appeared in the hedge gap. While Caleb stared another figure flashed through ahead of him, laughter upon her lips, and paused a-tip-toe to wave a hand in greeting. And instantly, as they had ten years before, Barbara Allison's eyes swung in instant scrutiny of the one who was seated at Caleb's feet. She hesitated and recovered herself. But when with quite dignified deliberation she finally came forward to pass that motionless figure upon the steps every pulse in her body was beating consciousness of his nearness. And yet at that when she paused at Caleb's side and bobbed her head with a characteristic impetuosity which she had never lost she seemed completely oblivious to the presence of any one save Caleb and herself.

"Good morning, Uncle Cal," she murmured very demurely.

Then the man upon the steps moved. He rose and turned and swept his rather weather beaten hat from his head. His hair was still wavy, still chestnut in the shadows. And Caleb, though he could not force a word from his tightened throat, marveled how tall the boy had grown—how paradoxically broad of shoulder and slender of body he seemed to be.

Dexter Allison, coming up less airily across the lawn, surprised his daughter poised with one hand outstretched, red lips half open. He found her staring, velvet eyed and pink of face, at a tall figure in blue flannel and corduroy, and, although he had never seen him in all the months that the latter had been in his employ, Allison knew this must be the one in whose keeping lay, directly or indirectly, the success or failure of the biggest thing he had ever attempted in this north country—the man to whom he always referred, whenever he boasted of his exploits, as "my man O'Mara."

"I always told them that you would come back," she murmured.

"I always told them that you would come back," she murmured then. "Just as you—you said you would."

The remark was barely loud enough for even Steve to hear, but hard upon its utterance she caught her breath in anger at herself for her own senseless confusion, which had led her into saying the one thing she least of all had wanted to voice. Even an inane remark concerning the weather would have been better than that girlish naivete which she felt seemed to force upon him, too, a recollection of the very letter of a promise which had, no doubt, long since become in his mind nothing but a quaint episode not untinged with absurdity.

"Hum-m-m!" puffed Allison. "Hum-m-m!" He spoke directly to Stephen O'Mara, who half turned his head at the first heavily facetious syllable, "So you did get my message, eh? I rather thought that it wouldn't reach you up river until today." An ample smile embraced the tall figure in riverman's garb and, his own daughter's crimson countenance—a most meaningful smile of roguery. "Well, from what I've heard," he stated, "and what I've • • • seen, I should say that you are my man O'Mara. Mr. Elliott himself has informed me that your quite spectacular success in one or two vital campaigns has been entirely due to the fact that you are an—er—opportunist! I agree with Mr. Elliott absolutely—that is, if my first premise is correct."

Barbara's face had cooled a little in that moment since Steve's eyes had left her face. Now she forgot her confusion—forgot to be annoyed, even at her father's clumsy banter.

"Your man, O'Mara!" she exclaimed indignantly. "Your man! Why, he—he's my"— And that was as far as she went.

Her voice thinned into nothingness, but words were not necessary to tell either Caleb or Steve that she had been about to assert a prior claim which dated back years and years.

"I have always insisted to Mr. Elliott," Steve said, "that the solution of all the difficulties, which he chooses to view as gloriously romantic tilts with Destiny, depends one half upon luck and the other half on being on the ground personally when the—affair—starts." He half faced toward Allison. "I am O'Mara," he finished very briefly; "your man, O'Mara—if you happen to be the East Coast Development and Timber company."

There was at most no more than the barest suggestion of it in Steve's crisp question, but Caleb sensed immediately that Allison's placid appropriation of the blue flannel shirted one as his own particular property was not a mutually accepted status. Dexter, however, failed or chose to read nothing in the drawling question.

"I'm it," he agreed jovially—"that is, I and two or three others, including Mr. Elliott, our esteemed president. I've heard much of you, Mr. O'Mara. I've looked forward to this meeting," he added as he shook hands. "Now I want to tell you that I am proud to know you. And so you didn't get my message, after all?"

"I had to come down river yesterday," Steve explained. "Your telegram found me here, and I waited over until this morning, as you suggested."

"Surely—surely! I see—I see!" Allison emphasized his comprehension. "Not that it was anything of vital importance. I just wanted a short conference with you, that was all."

"Would you—would you mind finding Miss Sarah, Steve?" Caleb asked. "Will you tell her, please, that we are to be subjected to another—neighborly imposition?"

Allison shook his head and led the way to a chair. "I didn't know that you were acquainted with him, Cal. Have you known him long?"

"Um-m-m—yes!" Caleb weighed his reply. "Quite some time, I think I might say."

He shook with scarcely suppressed laughter, but Allison ignored his senseless mirth.

"I'd like to claim that boy as my own discovery," he avowed, "but I can't, not without fear of successful contradiction on Elliott's part. And in point of service it isn't fair to call him a boy, either, though I suppose both of us are old enough to be his father. He's Elliott's find. Elliott suggested him as the one man for this job when I consolidated with the Ainnesley crowd and they took up the contract to move the reserve timber from Thirty Mile and the valleys above. Elliott knew of him, but I've been looking up his record pretty closely since he took hold in earnest.

"He's in his twenties, as near as I can make out, but he's come through on one of two jobs that might well make an old campaigner envious. He took a fortune in hard woods out of San Domingo for a Berlin concern; he was the only man on the St. Sebastian river job who said the construction was too light. He said it wouldn't stand when the ice began to move in the spring, and it didn't! Oh, he knows his business! But it wasn't his successes which caught Elliott's eye. It's the way he has failed a couple of times, fighting right back to the last ditch, and fighting and fighting, when all the rest had quit, that made me anxious to get a look at him. Perhaps there are older men who can outfigure him on loads and stresses, but as a field general he stands alone. He can handle men. And when it comes to meeting conditions just as they arise Elliott says he's a wonder. He can outguess dear old Mother Nature herself.

"That's why the East Coast company brought him up here to build its bit of road," he went on slowly. "They've got to move that Reserve company timber. They have a contract that'll break 'em—break us—if we fall down. And do you know, Cal, I—I can't help but believe that the thing is beyond the pale of possibility. I believed it six months ago, when Elliott and Ainnesley and the rest of them were so keen for it, and I believe it still, even though I have seen Elliott's engineer and know what he has already accomplished. That track'll never go through on schedule—and that's why I'm up here for the winter. It's going to be a hot little race against time, with some millions for a purse. It'll break the East Coast company if he fails, and"—his voice became oddly intense—"and I tell you again that it—can't—be—done!"

Allison lay back in his chair and breathed deeply, slowly, and Miss Sarah appeared that moment in the doorway, pinker of cheek and more tremulous of lip than her brother had ever seen her before. She dropped Allison an old fashioned courtesy, which was an exceedingly frivolous performance for Sarah.

"Breakfast is served, Cal," she fairly chortled, "and there are two very hungry children inside."

(To be continued)

A BETTER DAY DAWNING FOR BLEEDING MEXICO

Long-time Resident Sees Great Hope Ahead— Organized Opposition Practically at an End—Bandits Rounded up or Forced to Cover—Railway Service Normal—Elections Soon to be Held—Pressing Public Education—The People Eager for Christian Leadership. By Southern News Missionary Bureau.

Nashville, Tenn.—(Special Correspondence.)—Dr. G. B. Winton, of this city, for many years a resident of Mexico, the author of a widely-read book, "Mexico Today," and an authority on Mexican matters, declares that present conditions in that country are much more hopeful than is generally believed.

"There is now practically no organized opposition to the de facto government," he said when asked for a statement.

"Villa had been defeated and forced into the mountains of Chihuahua even before Carranza's recognition by the United States. The same is true of Zapata, who is in hiding in the all but inpenetrable mountains, nobody knows exactly where. He cannot easily be captured, but, on the other hand, he can do no great harm.

"My daily paper arrives regularly from Mexico City, showing that train service is practically normal. From it I learn that municipal elections are to be held throughout Mexico in September, and that the governors of states, nearly all young and progressive men, are taking special pains to guarantee freedom of the ballot and fair elections. A constitutional convention will next be called to revise the federal constitution, and after that national elections will be held. In the meantime, federal courts, district and circuit, have already been established throughout the country.

"The matter of public education is being pressed. In Mexico City and the federal territories this work is in charge of Prof. Andres Osuna, a highly educated, thoroly equipped Christian gentleman, well known in the United States, having for several years been a resident of this country. Like a great many others of Mexico's reform leaders, Osuna is a product of Christian missions. Now that the civil war in Mexico is over and the trouble with the United States in a fair way to early adjustment, I believe missions will have a better opportunity in that country than ever before. The people are hungry for enlightenment, mental and moral."

THE NEED OF WORKERS IN MEXICO

"If there ever was a time when the truths of Christianity needed to be set before the Mexican people it is now," writes a Presbyterian missionary to Mexico.

"So by precept and example we expect to keep on in the work until circumstances force us to leave, and I am hoping that hour will not come.

"Send us reinforcements. There is no use to wait for calm in Mexico. There are certainly a half dozen valiant souls who would be glad to carry the 'faith of our fathers' into Mexico.

"High prices, low wages and depreciated currency make untold suffering even to-day, and there is little hope in sight. But adversity makes the heart tender and easy of access. The Presbyterian Church is not yet doing anything like its share of the work to be done in Mexico.

"If you call for recruits for Mexico they'll come as they came for China, as they always have come when the call was made with no uncertain sound."

GOOD DEEDS.

Remember that if the opportunities for great deeds should never come, the opportunity for good deeds is renewed for you day by day. The thing for us to long for is goodness, not glory.—Dean Farrar.

A Painted Eye

It Was Too Expressive For Its Natural Mate.

By F. A. MITCHEL

Far back in the days when the king of England claimed to be king of France, and when as a consequence the French and the English were at continual warfare, there lived on French soil in what is now the department of Mayenne a gentleman and his wife of the name of Castilleux. There was born to this couple a son who from his earliest infancy was a very beautiful child. Even when he was between one and two years old he attracted the attention of all who saw him. His most noticeable feature was a pair of large expressive eyes of heaven's own blue. In those days artists were painting pictures of the Madonna and child, and for many such studies little Gaston Castilleux served as a model.

When Gaston was fourteen years old he was out hunting one day with a party of boys, and one of his companions, seeing his brown doublet through a break in the leaves of the trees, mistook it for a deer and let fly an arrow, which struck Gaston in one of his eyes. So severe was the wound that the surgeon who attended him decided the eye must be taken out.

Great was the grief of the boy's parents at having the beauty of their son thus marred. Until the wound had healed he wore over the place where the eye had been a patch. Then his mother bethought herself of providing an artificial eye for her darling. That was a time before the remarkable work in glass and pottery of the present day had been achieved, and the only way to procure a glass eye was to have the glass molded or ground in proper shape and painted. Indeed, there was an advantage in this because an artist could the better match the real eye.

Mme. Castilleux announced that she would give a prize of a thousand louis d'or for the best coloring of a glass eye for her son. Artists were as poor in those days as they are now, and there were a great many of them competing for the public favor. Such a prize was coveted, and artists came from far and near to compete for it. There were so many of them that only those who had achieved a name were granted a sitting, for of course the object was to reproduce the real eye.

Among the throng of men who applied for permission to compete for the prize was a girl in the garb of a peasant. In those days women did not do men's work, and painting was considered a man's profession. Furthermore, the peasant girl could not claim to have achieved any reputation as an artist. Mme. Castilleux was about to send her away when Gaston came into the room where his mother was receiving candidates. Whether it was distress at the marring of such beauty or pity for him or some other reason, the maiden gave him a look so full of sympathy that he was determined she should compete for the prize. Turning to his mother, he expressed his desire. Mme. Castilleux was much concerned at this, for she had always been careful to keep her son from falling under the influence of any woman except of high rank, since she feared a misalliance. Besides, under the coarse peasant's garb the girl wore was a rare beauty. The mother took her son aside and protested against a woman, one of such low degree and of no artistic reputation, being permitted to compete for the prize, but failed to move him, and the girl was accepted as a competitor. Her name was entered on the list as Clochette Boyer, and since sittings were given in order of application and Clochette was the last accepted she was to be assigned the last sitting.

Ten artists were to compete for the prize, and Mme. Castilleux chose three experts to award the prize, reserving the right, if she differed with them, to buy the work of any other artist. Though the sittings were not usually very long, Gaston tired at having to go through the process so many times. Then, too, several artists made two or three different attempts—they were not limited in this respect—and by the time the last competitor's turn came the subject was tired out. Of the earlier efforts the first was the best. After that Gaston began to weary and showed his weariness in the eye that was serving for a model, so that every attempt showed a more worn expression than the one before. Strange to say, the ninth was the best of all. The truth is Gaston was enduring all these tiresome sittings waiting for the peasant girl to try her hand. At the ninth sitting he was happy in the thought that the strain was nearly over and at the next he would have the companionship of the girl who had given him that welcome look of sympathy.

At last Clochette appeared with her brushes and palette. The change in Gaston's expression was marvelous. He forgot his weariness; he forgot his misfortune in the loss of his eye; he forgot everything except the girl who was looking alternately from her canvas to his face. She was not sufficiently experienced in her art to call out a pleasing expression by conversing with him on subjects that interested him, but she needed no such experience, for he chatted with her from the moment the sitting began until it ended. And when she had finished and he looked at the result of her work he said to her:

"It is excellent, but I think you can do better. Try again tomorrow."

When Mme. Castelleux was told that another sitting was to be granted the girl the next day she took fright at once, for Gaston told her that it was he who had suggested this. But Gaston had always been accustomed to having his own way, and, although his mother saw plainly that her son was falling in love with a peasant girl, she could do nothing to prevent it. She began to regret that she had brought about this ill fated competition.

At the next sitting Clochette did improve on what she had done the day before. Gaston was much pleased with the result of his suggestion and told her that he wished her to try every day until it became evident that she could do no better. When he informed his mother of this the poor woman was in despair. She had seen her son's beauty marred; now she saw him passing into an infatuation for a peasant girl. Knowing his strong will, she felt sure that a second misfortune no less to be dreaded than the first would befall him and his family.

Clochette painted a new eye every day, and every eye was better than the last. When Gaston was as much in love as it was possible for him to be there was no improvement in the work, and he told his mother that he was satisfied.

Then came the inspection of the work by the experts. Gaston was required to hold the artificial eyes in turn beside his real eye, beginning with the first eye painted. As he went down the list a tired expression appeared and increased until the ninth eye was reached, which showed an expression of relief. None of the eyes was satisfactory for this reason and one other. In Gaston's eye there was no tired look to match that in the artificial eye. Indeed, not one of the painted eyes was satisfactory.

Gaston, who regarded all this as preliminary to the remarkable work done by Clochette, was impatient to show the experts what she had accomplished. Clochette was present and as eager as he for the exhibition of the eye which she and Gaston had selected to compete for the award. Gaston at last was permitted to hold the eye next his own. A singular expression came over the faces of those who looked at him. While the painted eye expressed the quintessence of love, his real eye expressed triumph. The audience began to laugh when Clochette, seeing what neither she nor Gaston had seen before, attracted his attention to herself. Instantly the real eye as well as the false one looked love.

There is no expression in the human face that is more engaging than love. For the time being at least Clochette's work was a marvelous success. The two eyes matched not only in color, but in expression. The peasant's work, therefore, was the best, and the experts had no choice but to award her the prize. What was the astonishment of all when she declined to receive it, but expressed a wish that it should be given to one of the competitors, who was starving. When Gaston found that he could not persuade her to take it herself he respected her wish, and the money was given as she had indicated.

Then Clochette withdrew.

Gaston spent a month of misery trying to forget the peasant girl whom he loved, but whom it was not meet that he should marry. At last he could stand it no longer; he must at least have one more sight of her. He inquired among the neighbors as to where she lived, but none of them could inform him. Mounting his horse, he set out to look for her. He did not find her.

Now and again for weeks he went in quest of the girl he loved, always to return disappointed. One day he stopped at a chateau to ask for a little refreshment. A lady advanced to meet him who filled him with astonishment. She was Clochette.

And Clochette was as much surprised to see Gaston as he was to see her. They stood looking at each other for a time; then the girl's face broke into a smile.

"I had seen you," she explained after the first greetings, "and, having a taste for art, when I heard of the prize offered I wished to compete for it. Not wishing to do so as myself, I adopted the garb of a peasant."

"And why did you desire to help me? You would not accept the prize after you had won it."

A blush told the story far more effectively than words.

When Gaston returned to his home and announced to his mother that the peasant competitor for her prize was a lady and lived in a chateau Mme. Castilleux was as much astonished as he had been. Not only was she astonished, but relieved. She had noticed her son's dejection and believed that sooner or later he would find Clochette. Now she was not only pleased that he had found his love, but was not averse to the two making a match.

Marriage, especially in high life, in those days was arranged by the parents of the contracting parties. One day M. Castilleux drove up in his coach to the chateau of M. Latrobe and asked for the hand of his daughter, whose real name was Louise, for his son Gaston. Louise had already settled the matter, and all her father had to do was to give his consent and arrange for the settlements.

After the marriage young Mme. Castilleux painted an eye for her husband which matched his real eye under ordinary circumstances, and this eye he was obliged to make serve, for since no artificial eye can change with the expression of a real one, this one was not perfect.